

# The Silk Road: Boosting the Textile Industry in Tang Dynasty\*

HUAN Xiaoyu, YU Peixin, ZHANG Zhengqing, JIA Xiaoqing  
University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

At the height of the Tang Dynasty, trading on the Silk Road reached its peak, which brought opportunities for the development of the textile industry. The Silk Road broadened the domestic and foreign textiles market, influenced Han people's aesthetic and consumption concepts, and promoted textile trading. The Silk Road expanded the categories of textile products and promoted trading and innovation. It facilitated the exchange of textile technology and formed a virtuous cycle of "export-development overseas-import". The development of the textile industry relied on both traditional technology and foreign technology, which was reflected in the achievements in printing, dyeing, and brocade, and laid a superb technical foundation for the development of the textile industry later.

*Keywords:* textiles, Tang Dynasty, Silk Road, textile technique, brocade weaving

## Introduction

The Tang Dynasty brought us the pinnacle of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. (In this article, "China" in Tang Dynasty mainly refers to the Central Plains populated by Han people.) The open cultural policy made a profound impact on the history and culture of other nations. At the same time, along with the spread of the achievements of the Tang civilization along the Silk Road, the textile industry of the Tang Dynasty was developed through a surge in demand and importing foreign textile technology. The economic and cultural exchange on the Silk Road was huge, overcoming religious beliefs and classes. Given its power and cultural strength, the Tang Dynasty stood high above all other cultures. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the influence of textile technology and textile culture on the Tang textile industry. Previously, other scholars have focused on the cultural and technological export aspects of the Tang textile industry and their impact on the present-day fashion industry and art: Cui and Hou (2017) analyzed the role of the Silk Road in cultural exchange between the East and the West; Ye (2021) analyzed the period characteristics and aesthetic features of Tang Dynasty costumes from an aesthetic perspective; Zhang (2022) analyzed the influence of Tang Dynasty on modern fashion design. However, little attention has been paid to how the absorption and development of the Tang textile industry itself went under the influence of the Silk

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HUAN Xiaoyu, undergraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

YU Peixin, undergraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

ZHANG Zhengqing, undergraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

JIA Xiaoqing, correspondence author, associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Road. Therefore, based on documentary and historical materials, we refer to the views of scholars and the introduction of artisans to analyze the Silk Road from a cross-cultural perspective, offering a view on the development of the textile industry and culture in the Tang Dynasty under the influence of the Silk Road.

## Great Opportunities Brought by the Silk Road

### The Flourishing Oversea Market

In addition to the local smallholder economy's self-supporting needs, over sea markets were greatly boosted by their demand for silk goods as the Silk Road introduced the commodity to the West, which promoted the development of the textile trade and stimulated the expansion of the textile industry. In the east of the Pamirs, silk was used as currency instead of copper in long-distance trade for its light weight and high value. After the rebellion of An and Shi, the famous "Silk horse trade" between Tang and Huihu emerged and born large-scale silk trades (Moriyasu, 2007). According to the *Book of Tang*, there was a rich man named He Mingyuan in Dingzhou, who specialized in trading with the Hu people (Hu people in this article refers to the people in nations west of the Silk Road), owned an unparalleled wealth and 500 silk machines (Lu, 1997: 81-83). So, textile export to the West has already become a valid way to get rich, which incited the expansion of textile production, meeting the huge volume of textiles demand. At the same time, considering the huge volume of foreign trade, Tang officials also began to stock textiles.

### Profound Impacts on the Domestic Market

For the domestic market, the Silk Road made a great impact on people's consumption values and cultural life, thus improving their weaving technique and consumer demands for textiles.

**Consumption values.** In the early Tang Dynasty, the Zhenguan Period, thrift has always been the goal. Later, the virtue of "necessity, not extravagance" was greatly weakened. Under the impact of the growing commodity economy, royals and nobles left their virtue of "abstain luxury" behind. For the Tang Dynasty, extravagance had its day, and tributary trade was only one of its origins. The Silk Road trade brought exotic treasures, changing how royals and nobles lived (Song, 2015). The demand of aristocrats for exquisite textiles, especially weft brocade, increased greatly (Li & Li, 2018). As a result, domestic products offered to the imperial court were in pursuit of novelty and ingenuity, pushing innovation in the textile industry, which promoted the flourishing of textile arts and crafts. Therefore, the Silk Road pushed the profit-seeking textile industry to devote itself to technological innovation, production, and category expansion, imperceptibly changing people's consumption value, and promoting the increase of textile trade in the domestic market.

**Cultural life.** Trade along the Silk Road facilitated migration and cultural integration. In the Tang Dynasty, the Hu Style prevailed in the major metropolis, presenting a grand scene of the mixture of Hu and Han nations. Meanwhile, with cultures influencing one another, the Hu people began wearing Hanfu, and the Han people appeared to be "all dressed in Hu style from men to women, nobles to common people" (*Old Book of Tang*). As a result, the traditional dress codes vanished from urban life. In this case, textile consumption that transcended the hierarchy is becoming more common. According to the *Old Book of Tang*, peeresses "lived an extravagant and dissipated life when they are out in the streets, wearing clothes made from any kinds of gorgeous and precious fabrics they wish". From the nobles to the common people, they followed the trend and chase fashion without considering the dressing codes of social hierarchy (*Old Book of Tang*). And the trends of chasing "fashion" and "luxury" to some extent broke them free from the shackles of former strict regulations.

We know now that during the Tang Dynasty, when economic and cultural exchange along the Silk Road flourished, economic development also whetted secular desires; foreign nations brought in different ideas, religions, and customs, which broke former rules and regulations and incited worldly desires. After all, “fashion” can serve as a guide for the textile industry, revealing potential demands and purchasing power, which promised a bright future for the whole textile industry.

**The virtuous loop of innovation.** In previous Silk Road trade exchanges, China’s textile technology traveled far, going to foreign countries through both marine and land Silk Road. So Chinese textile technology was already seeded in different cultural soil, germinating and then producing all different kinds of fruits with all their glory. As the trade activities along the Silk Road reached their peak in the Tang Dynasty, the technologies went back home, to the Central Plains, with all new features, bringing fresh opportunities to the textile industry in the Tang Dynasty.

Aside from the products, foreign techniques played an important role in the tributary trade along the Silk Road. According to “Ce Fu Yuan Gui”, through the Marine Silk Road, Japanese envoys to Tang Dynasty brought both improved and new silk weaving techniques: including thick silk fabrics called “Mino no Aashiqui” and “Mizuori no ashiginu” (two types of Japanese fabrics that require simple techniques but have strong ethnic styles), yellow flatbread, coarse silk, and coyote silk. Bawn silk and Yuya silk, rich in Korean Peninsula (Xinluo), were also introduced into the Central Plains (He, 1989), promoting technical exchanges among craftsmen from all over the world.

Chinese silk brocade fabrics were spread to the Sassanid Dynasty in West Asia and Persia through the grassland Silk Road. The Persians, combining wool weaving and silk weaving technology, making innovative adjustments, gave birth to the famous Linked-Pearl Pattern. In the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, this weft brocade weaving technique has already been brought back to China. However, it was not until the Tang Dynasty, when cultural diversity boomed, that the weft brocade weaving technique got further development. The Persian style twill weft brocade with beaded animal patterns was very popular in the Tang Dynasty, giving inspiration to weavers in Central China. The prosperity of the Silk Road trade and the pursuit of novel skills drove Dou Shilun from Yizhou, Sichuan Province to absorb foreign techniques and created the Lingyanggong symmetrical patterns, a rich and exquisite design (Tu, 2003). Compared with traditional weaving machines, the Sassanid weaving machines had the advantage of simpler operation and the ability to weave the weft-brocade with varied colors. Fabrics produced with them were bright, gorgeous, and unparalleled. Combining the advantages of the traditional loom and Sassanian loom, Chinese craftsmen created the Hualou jacquard loom, which laid the foundation for the further development of textile technology in later generations.

### Conclusion

The Silk Road, along with the open economic and cultural policies of the Tang Dynasty, not only expanded the textile market at home and abroad, but also promoted the status of businessmen against the traditional idea that a country should: “value agriculture and suppress commerce”. It also influenced the aesthetic and consumption value of the Tang people, inciting human nature and consumption potentials, which provided opportunities for textile trade. In this context, the ever-increasing level of consumer demand pushed artisans to explore innovative skills, while the inflow of foreign textile technology facilitated innovation. Throughout history, the textile technology of the Central Plains has experienced a course of export-development overseas import through cultural and technological communication along the Silk Road.

And the technology imported back has introduced new ideas, enabling China to boost productivity and enrich product lines. In such a vibrant economic and cultural environment, the textile printing and dyeing technology of the Tang Dynasty made great achievements, laying a solid foundation for the development of the textile industry in later generations. Such a virtuous cycle brought about by the Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty led to huge technological improvements. Craftsmanship in the textile, printing, and dyeing industry, also says a lot about the national character of the Chinese people.

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